

The Doris Lessing Protagonist: A Unique Formula

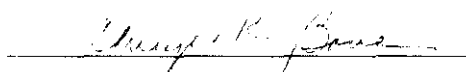
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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**THE DORIS LESSING PROTAGONIST: A UNIQUE FORMULA by Molly A. Stoudt  
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After having discovered Doris Lessing in ENG 230, Molly wanted to further her research on this controversial British author. In this paper, Molly explores the complexity of the Lessing protagonist, which requires a careful consideration of the ensuing assertions by Lessing scholars as well as Lessing's background, influences, and experiences. Most importantly, Molly attempts to define Lessing's critical stance as portrayed through her protagonists.

Doris Lessing has been and continues to be an incredible influence on her literary audience, as well as on an emerging age of female writers. Lessing has been prolific in her writing endeavors and has composed works of literature in genres such as novels, poetry, short stories and screen plays. Whatever the genre, however, her protagonist is undoubtedly similar in each of her works. An outline of the "Lessing protagonist" can be drawn by comparing different works from several genres. The short stories "A Man and Two Women," and "To Room Nineteen," the novel *The Golden Notebook*, and the play *Play With a Tiger* will be considered for this purpose. After determining the characteristics of the Lessing protagonist, it can be said that the main characters of each of these works strikingly portray many components of Doris Lessing's own life. The conclusion drawn by many Lessing scholars, such as Margaret Moan Rowe who assumed this critical stance in her Lessing biography for the *Women Writers* series, and Paul Schlueter, who has written a Preface for *The Golden Notebook*, is that most of her protagonists are partially self-reflective and somewhat autobiographical. Despite the general acceptance of this conclusion, Lessing continues to forcefully deny any autobiographical meaning or feminist intent in her works. It is therefore difficult to establish a firm conclusion about Lessing's protagonists despite the persistence of the Lessing scholars to determine her definitive feminist stance. Rather, Lessing prefers to be accepted as a writer who dares to present realistic issues in an open-ended manner and thus allows and encourages reader response. In order to discuss the complexity of the Lessing

protagonist and the ensuing assertions of her scholars, Lessing's background, influences, and experiences must first be presented. It will then be possible to explore the similarities and parallels of Lessing's protagonists, so that a more detailed presentation of Lessing's critical stance may be illustrated. Finally, the critical dilemma that has transpired through the circulation of her literary achievements will be explored through a compilation of responses from Lessing scholars and teachers.

In order to understand the Doris Lessing protagonist, it is imperative to be familiar with her background. Doris May Tayler was born on October 22, 1919, in Kermanshah, Persia. She was the daughter of Alfred Cook Tayler, who became an invalid during World War I, and Emily Maude McVeagh Tayler, who met her husband as his nurse. The Taylers, including Doris and her younger brother Harry, moved to Southern Rhodesia in 1924. Her father purchased a farm, which never prospered, and Doris entered the world of the frontiersmen. She was often encouraged to wander the countryside with rifle in hand to search for food (Pickering 15). While living as a young frontiersman, Doris was liberated from the rigid female role at an early age.

Doris Lessing was and continues to be a great observer, and she was deeply affected by the oppression in Africa. As a teen, Doris Lessing was acutely aware of the unfair imposition of the white settlers on the native Rhodesians. After having read Lawrence Vambe's *An Ill-fated People: Zimbabwe Before and After Rhodes*, in her youth Lessing noted:

Into these deserts, completely cut off from modern life, are forcibly herded people whose way of life before the white man came was as wide, variegated,

full of potential, as Africa itself. The white people began to steal the land as soon as they arrived in the country. (qtd in Rowe 2)

Claiming as much independence as possible for a teenage female in the early 1900s, Lessing attempted to attack the issues of prejudice by recording in writing the injustices she witnessed. Many of these experiences contributed to her first novel *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), in which the theme of the novel is based on “a white outpost in a remote colony” (Rowe 14). The influence of her African upbringing carried over into her adult life, as Doris Lessing eventually assumed an active role as a political activist and critic of her childhood home.

The native Rhodesians viewed the white settlers as thieves stealing their land, but many of the settlers, including the Taylers, considered themselves British, white landowners with an obligation to civilize the untamed land (Rowe 2). In later reflections, Lessing asserts that the white settlers of Rhodesia were not rugged and resourceful people, but rather a collective British society, trying to create an identical reflection of their homeland (Rowe 2). Because this British society refused to assimilate and work in conjunction with the natives, these settlers found only failure as farmers on a foreign land. Lessing felt that their efforts to civilize the natives resulted in actually raping a long-standing established community of its personal identity. In “Flavors of Exile,” Lessing illustrates her own mother’s desire to create a bit of England for herself; her mother desperately wants to use the same type of vegetation as she did in England, but it is obvious that Lessing does not share her mother’s desires:

Year after year my mother yearned for Brussels sprouts, whose name came to represent to me something exotic and unattainable. When at last she managed to grow a dozen spikes of this plant in one cold winter that

offered us sufficient frost, she of course sent a note to the MacGregors, so that they might share the treat... I said scornfully that I couldn't see what all the fuss was about. (139-140)

Further, Doris Lessing strongly opposed the hierarchies that formed, not only as a result of food and material possessions, but on a much larger social and cultural scale. Lessing was infuriated by the prejudices that were commonly directed at any non-Christian, non-white, or non-Northern European person. As more British settlers arrived to claim their fortune as landowners, the white community found strength in numbers and oppression of the natives ensued. Shopkeepers, Jews, Indians, and Greeks were accepted by the British community only as “necessary evils” (Rowe 3). In addition to reflecting her disapproval of such prejudice in her first novel *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing's position is also made clear in *Martha Quest* (1952), as Martha notes, “For what is community if not people who share their experience?” (44-45). Despite her young age, the violent and non-ethical imposition of the white settlers greatly conflicted with Doris Lessing's strong sense of justice.

Just as Maude Tayler felt obligated to create her own microcosm of British society, Doris Lessing was committed to a sense of social responsibility and “to a pursuit of those oppressed by society” (Bloom 18). Lessing found herself, however, devoted particularly to those whose spirit is actively suffocated by some source of oppression, not necessarily to the stereotypical minority. Despite their minority status as females, middle-class women who lack interest in political issues and substantial social responsibilities are treated harshly in Lessing's works. Because Lessing has stipulations for her devotions, she refuses to commit to any one group, goal, or idea for a long period of time. This refusal to commit or confine oneself is a

common characteristic of Lessing's protagonist, as this will be illustrated more thoroughly upon examining her works. Thus it is ironic that critics such as James Gordin should describe Doris Lessing as "intensely committed to active persuasion to reform society" (Bloom 9). Apparently, Lessing's commitment is to change, action, and reform, rather than a commitment to an organized party, which has the potential for stagnation.

Allegedly due to a recurring eye problem, Doris quit her formal education at the age of fourteen (Rowe 9). Her eye problem did not, however, prevent her from constantly reading and continuing her education according to her own interests. As it is said that Mrs. Tayler was displeased with Doris's decision to quit her formal education, it is possible that the eye problem existed only through Doris's testimony. Because of her limited experience with formal education, Doris Lessing is credited with shaping herself as an intellectual (Rowe 8). Lessing did not always read for enjoyment, nor did she read to be persuaded by the writer; rather, Lessing absorbed as much material as possible in order to gain knowledge of the world in which she participated. She studied mostly nineteenth-century literature, which is attributed to her ethical concerns, as well as contemporary political works, such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (Rowe 7). In "The Small Personal Voice," Lessing offers her literary preferences when she says, "For me the highest point of literature was the novel of the nineteenth century, the work of Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Turgenev, Chekhov; the works of the great realists" (Voice 4). It is said that *The Golden Notebook* is written with striking similarities in form to these novels of the nineteenth century (Bloom 75).

Absent from her list of influences is representation from nineteenth-century British novelists. Lessing dismisses the Victorian period in her "Preface" of *The Golden Notebook* by

saying, “But a very useful Victorian novel never got itself written... There isn’t one novel that has the vigour and conflict of ideas in action that is in a good biography of William Morris” (*Notebook xi*). Lessing rejects the Victorian period for its ideology, which produced her parents and their values. It is also said that upon her return to England in 1949, Lessing was treated as a colonial and was thus shunned by British literary figures (Rowe 8). Perhaps for reasons of spite and principle, Lessing credits her literary foundation to non-British ancestors.

In opposition to her claims, Doris Lessing’s political preferences and personal views chronologically coincide with the themes of her literary works. Lessing’s interest in politics eventually led to her involvement in communist activities, which ultimately influenced her own literary works. Lessing became extremely active in the Marxist movement prior to the culmination of World War II. Lessing scholar Molly Hite claims that *The Golden Notebook* is a novel-length “critique of Marxist ideology” (qtd in Kaplan 14). Frederick Stern, however, boldly asserts that “Lessing’s commitment from the beginning of her work... was not to Marxist thought and its revolutionary components but rather to radical humanist thought” (qtd in Kaplan 14). Despite the difference in scholarly opinion, Lessing was undoubtedly active in the Communist arena during the early portion of her writing career.

Furthermore, Lessing’s experience with Communist activities and ideology are present in her earliest works, and most notably in *Retreat to Innocence*, which was published in 1956, after *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*, but before *A Ripple from the Storm*. According to Frederick C. Stern, Lessing was in the process of disassociating with her Communist circle while writing *Retreat to Innocence* (Kaplan 47). One of the novel’s main characters, Jan Brod, is said to have been the most convincing and appealing Communist in Lessing’s works.



This character is representative of the firm belief Lessing once had in Communist ideology. Like many of Lessing's male figures, Brod is a charming and vivacious European Jew. Jan Brod is a convinced Communist, despite his concern about his best friend's execution by the Party, as well as the red tape that hinders his own journey home (Kaplan 46). Although Brod is aware of the faults within the Party, he remains devoted to Communism and adheres to the position that "the Party is always right" (Kaplan 46). By 1956, however, it is believed that Lessing had already begun her severance from this ideology, and it is possible that Jan Brod most likely characterizes the disillusionment she experienced through the Communist party (Kaplan 47).

As Communist violations of democracy, executions, imprisonments, and other Stalinist horrors were exposed, Lessing experienced a progression of disillusionment as well, which was captured throughout the entire *Children of Violence* series (Kaplan 47). In this series Lessing's political involvement and interest is charted through the main character, Martha Quest. Throughout the series, Martha's political views are constantly shifting, most notably in *Ripple from the Storm* and *Landlocked*. Frederick C. Stern, a Lessing scholar, notes:

Martha's allegiances shift from the shopworn ideology of the Communist party and its arid brand of socialism, to Thomas Stern's intense self-sacrificing, nearly mad desire to undo justice--with a passion like Jan Brod's, but, although essentially socialist, without Brod's reliance on "the Party." (qtd in Kaplan 48).

Furthermore, it has been noted by Lessing scholars that many parallels can be drawn between Lessing and her protagonist Martha Quest. For example, Lessing's views on formal education

are also briefly expressed in *Martha Quest* through Martha's preference for independent reading and self-enrichment over rigid exams (Rowe 9).

With substantial reason, Doris Lessing is often compared to another acclaimed female writer, George Eliot. Like Lessing, Eliot was considered to be self-taught. Neither writer attended a formal college or university, and both found intellectual stimulation through a radical circle of friends (Rowe 10). Eliot was involved with *The Westminster Review*, and Lessing was active in communist groups after her return to Salisbury. Because both writers found their family values to be unsettling, Eliot and Lessing became actively and fervently involved in various movements throughout their lives, often radically changing their personal stances (Rowe 10). By comparing Eliot's *Middlemarch* to Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, it is apparent that both writers struggled with a resistance toward the feminist movement and the suffocation of oppression (Rowe 10). Lessing has been most concerned with overcoming her feminist identity in order to represent a strong individualist identity.

In 1938 Doris relocated to Salisbury to work as a telephone operator. It was at this time in her life that she began writing, mostly as a result from her involvement with a progressive, young, and intellectual crowd. This group of young people frequented the Sports Club, which was the banal site for many sequences in *Children of Violence* (Rowe 11). The following year Lessing married her first husband, Frank Wisdom, whom she met through her societal circle. Wisdom was a civil servant and the father of her first two children, John and Jean, who remained with their father after their parents' divorce in 1943. Lessing accredits her first divorce to her participation in the Marxist movement; she was simply overwhelmed with the ennui of the suburban married life. Following her divorce, Lessing became involved

with a group of European immigrants and RAF members who were actively involved with the social unrest in Southern Rhodesia. From her association with this second movement, Lessing received political enlightenment. The essence of her political education is captured in *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, and *The Golden Notebook* (Rowe 11). Once again, it was her involvement in and departure from these diverse groups that shaped her character as one who refuses to commit to any one idea or movement. Rather, Lessing is committed only to change.

In 1945 she married Gottfried Anton Lessing, a comrade in Marxism and a German refugee as well, and bore her third child, Peter. This marriage ultimately ended as Lessing's second and final divorce. With her son, fresh divorce papers, and a manuscript of her first novel, she returned to England in 1949. Lessing wanted to earn her living as a writer, and she published her first work *The Grass Is Singing* in 1950. Reflective of her childhood experiences with racial prejudice, *The Grass Is Singing* is a story about a white landowner's wife, their black servant, and the violence that results from this relationship. Lessing continued to support herself and her son through the publication of *Children of Violence*. *Children of Violence* is a quintet consisting of *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), *Landlocked* (1965), and *The Four-Gated City* (1969).

Following the successful *Children of Violence* series, Lessing wrote *The Golden Notebook* in 1962, which has become her most famous literary work. It is this novel that proposes such a seemingly strong feminist stance that it has been used repeatedly as a reference work by the Women's Movement. Since 1962, however, Doris Lessing has refused the proposal that the feminist stance portrayed in this novel is a reflection of her own beliefs.

Based on the undeniably autobiographical nature of her literary works, many critics, in turn, reject Lessing's claims.

Furthermore, Doris Lessing prefers to ignore the comparison of her works to her background as a source of her thoughts. Rather, Lessing believes that much can be learned from what is classified as madness, as this belief is often an overt theme in her works. Relationships, oppression, and societal expectations are often the source of this madness, as the three protagonists of her compared works, Susan Rawlings of "To Room Nineteen," Anna Freeman Wulf of *The Golden Notebook*, and Anna Freeman of *Play with a Tiger*, experience. Again, those who would link Lessing with the feminist movement point to these themes as indication of the position of women and their reaction to their status.

Perhaps due to her analytical nature, Doris Lessing offers insight into the meaning of her works in the names she carefully chooses for her protagonists. The most obvious examples can be seen in Anna Freeman Wulf of *The Golden Notebook*. Anna **Wulf** is derived from Virginia Woolf, with whom both Anna and Lessing share a commitment to writing, a desire for a solitary room in which to write, and an inclination toward madness (Pickering 93). In both examples, Anna **Freeman** boldly represents their status as "free women." It has also been proposed that Lessing's multiple use of **Anna** is ironically symbolic of Anna Livia Plurabelle, the archetypal mother (Pickering 93). This proposal appears reasonable as the role of the mother is a frequent issue among Lessing's protagonists. In the view of the protagonist, this role is most often stifling to the protagonist's character; therefore, Lessing's reference to an archetypal mother could be a deliberate irony. In addition to the obvious fact that

Lessing's protagonists are almost always female, she adds dimension to their character by the symbolism incorporated into their names.

In each name Doris chooses for her protagonist, she may also offer a glimpse of her own personal character. None of these three fictional women fits the mold of the socially accepted female role, and all three suffer psychologically as a result. Anna Freeman Wulf, the protagonist in *The Golden Notebook*, is considered "by far one of the most consciously self-critical and analytical women in modern fiction" (Bloom 45). Anna, a single mother and self-sufficient writer, is capable of acknowledging her broken mold: "Free women...They still define us in terms of relationships with men, even the best of them" (*Notebook* 4). Although she is fully aware of her independence, she is constantly searching for meaning. Anna expresses this state of chaos when she says, "Men. Women. Bound. Free. Good. Bad. Yes. No. Capitalism. Socialism. Sex. Love..." (*Notebook* 4). She is not the typical housewife; therefore, society suggests that something must be wrong with her. Anna would like to envision herself as prolific writer of great thought, able to make a difference in the bigger picture through her writing. In reality, Anna cannot concern herself with the "general breakdown in Western society" (Pickering 90), as she is consumed by the incoherence in her own life. Because Anna is gripped by an overwhelming fear of fragmentation, she mentally suffers in a world of writer's block.

Anna is, however, aware of the incoherence in her life, as the entire novel *The Golden Notebook* is constructed through Anna's determination to find order. Hoping to dissolve her writer's block, Anna proceeds to divide the madness in her life into four distinct notebooks. Once again, African experiences are present in the life of this protagonist, and these events are

appropriately logged in a black notebook; a red notebook is kept for reflective writing on her experiences as a Communist; a yellow notebook represents her desire to see herself in perspective; and a blue notebook is used for a daily journal. Collectively, the four notebooks are known as the golden notebook, hence the title. Anna offers only snapshots of her true character through her various notebooks, and these fragments give us a sense of the whole character. Katherine Fishburn, a Lessing scholar, makes this point:

The paradox inherent in this novel is that its wholeness is composed of fragments. Because reading is basically a linear activity, we first experience the fragmentation or the details of Anna's life. Once we have finished reading and can look back on what we have read, we begin to see the unity they constitute. (qtd in Kaplan 89)

Anna's efforts to compartmentalize her life ironically force the reader to piece together the fragmentation in order to become acquainted with Anna's true character.

Like Anna, Susan Rawlings from "To Room Nineteen" was once a true example of a broken stereotype: she waited to marry until her "seasoned late-twenties" (Nineteen 396), she was monetarily self-sufficient with a lucrative career, and she was intelligent in her own right. Ultimately, however, she falls victim to the typical housewife stereotype. Lessing begins "To Room Nineteen" by prefacing, "This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlings' marriage was grounded in intelligence" (Nineteen 396). Lessing uses oppression of spirit as the vehicle for her common theme of madness, and Susan Rawling's spirit lay in her intelligence. Lessing herself had twice faced the threat of intellectual confinement through marriage, and she immediately discarded the married life to maintain her independence.

Unlike Lessing, Susan passively abandons her once independent life to familial incarceration. As Susan begins to falter, she says, “Yet there have been times I thought that nothing existed of me except the roles that went with being Mrs. Matthew Rawlings” (Nineteen 411). Yet without her intellect and independence, Susan begins to feel worthless. It is important to note that her husband’s intellect continues to flourish while Susan’s mind deteriorates from the duress of her housewife responsibilities. It is only when Susan abandons her beliefs of equality that she succumbs to a stereotype of a typical housewife; however, Susan is ultimately incapable of adapting to the stereotypical maternal role. Even as her husband Matthew eliminates all maternal responsibilities by hiring as much help as Susan could possibly need, her spirit continues to deflate.

Susan Rawlings eventually finds solace in a small and sordid hotel room. Room nineteen of a small motel becomes the single source of vitality from which she can feed her troubled spirit. Despite the distasteful ambiance of her hideaway, Susan is able to shed her remaining identity and become anonymous. Lessing reveals:

Susan Rawlings prowled and muttered through her house, hating Mrs. Parkes, hating poor Miss Townsend, dreaming of her hour of solitude in the dingy respectability of Miss Townsend’s hotel bedroom, and she knew quite well she was mad. Yes, she was mad. (Nineteen 414)

When Susan’s retreat to room nineteen is discovered by her husband, her soul becomes emaciated. In effort to ignore the true deterioration of Susan’s mind, Matthew proposes the idea of a possible affair taking place in room nineteen. Susan adheres to this lie, as she knows the truth is incomprehensible for her sane husband. Following this false confession, Matthew

is relieved to admit that he, too, has been having an affair. Matthew goes as far to coyly and happily suggest the possibility of a foursome. The uneventful mendacity that results from the exposure of her beloved room nineteen are overwhelming to Susan, as she “slid down into the hollow of the bed, for shelter against her own irrelevance” (Nineteen 313). Because her only source of vitality is exposed, Susan is no longer capable of sustaining her own life. Susan is thus driven to insanity and eventually suicide.

Similar to Susan, Anna Freeman of *Play With a Tiger* sacrifices, or perhaps feigns, her independence for the affection of a man. In comparison to the characters of other Lessing protagonists, it can be surmised that Anna Freeman would be Lessing’s least desirable female role. Anna claims to be independent; however, she is the emotional victim of a capricious young American male, Dave. She only hides her weakness in a facade of independence. In a conversation with Dave, Anna says:

“O.K., then why don’t you come through for me? Here you are, Dave Miller, lecturing women all the time about how they should live--women should be free, they should be independent, etc, etc. None of these dishonest female ruses... The truth is you can’t take us, you can’t take me. I go through every kind of bloody misery trying to be what you want, but....” (*Play* 271)

From what is known about Doris Lessing, Anna is the least likely to capture Lessing’s true spirit, yet Anna is probably the most realistic and common character in our contemporary society. It soon becomes apparent that Anna’s repeatedly proclaimed independence is simply an effort to mold herself into the role desired by her young American lover. Lessing captures the essence of the notorious “identity-lost-to-codependency” crisis through Anna’s character.



To illustrate this crisis, Anna says to Dave in a moment of desperation, “What am I going to be without you, what shall I do?” (*Play* 234). Anna Freeman is a prime example of a female character treated harshly by Lessing.

Doris Lessing often uses a female counterpart as a foil to the female protagonist for the purpose of creating character by comparison. For example, in the first act of *Play With a Tiger* Lessing adds the brief appearance of Janet Stevens, an American girl who is pregnant with Dave’s child, and Lessing presents Stevens specifically to further define her protagonist. Earlier in the scene, Anna had declared her thoughts about Dave when she said, “Dave shouldn’t have picked on me. I’m economically independent. I have no urge for security so I don’t have to sell myself out” (*Play* 216-217). Serving as the foil for Anna, Janet soon enters the scene and tries in desperation to explain her relationship with Dave, as well as the meaning of her visit:

But I say to him, Dave, if you *work* at marriage then it is a *career*....

Sometimes he makes fun because I took domestic science and home care and child care as my subjects in college, but I say to him, Dave, marriage and the family is the most rewarding career a woman can have.... (*Play* 221-222)

Janet’s remarks show the reader the parallels between Anna’s and Janet’s relationships with Dave. As childish and unattainable as Janet’s wishes sound to Anna, she cannot contend with the fact that her desire for Dave, despite the different terms, is as passionate and unattainable as Janet’s. The different terms lie only between Janet’s willingness to be honest with herself and with others, and Anna’s insistence on lying to herself and to others by playing Dave’s desired role of the independent female. Following this brief encounter with Janet, Anna is left

feeling foolish and frustrated, and a corner of her facade has been lifted. Lessing has revealed that in all of Anna's self-deceit, she is truly a weaker character than her American counterpart.

Another example of a female counterpart for the purpose of characterization is found in Lessing's "A Man and Two Women." The character of the protagonist, Stella, is developed through her interactions with and her perception of her best friend, Dorothy Bradford. Lessing begins the short story with a history of their friendship, which includes their husbands. Lessing deliberately avoids naming Stella's husband, who is presently absent from this particular scene, until much later in the short story; in this way Lessing can focus on "a man and two women." Despite the fact that both couples are artists, Stella is quick to point out the fact that she and Dorothy's husband, Jack, are the only two who have truly been discovered (Man and Two 97-98). When making this assertion, Stella says, "All the same, there was that between him and Stella, just as there was between Jack and his wife" (Man and Two 98).

Upon entering the Bradfords' small cottage, Stella is extraordinarily observant of Dorothy, who has just begun the confinement of motherhood with a six-month-old son. Once again, Lessing uses the rite of motherhood as a turning point for mental destruction, for Dorothy is immediately changed by the added presence of a child. Dorothy openly reveals her repression, as she says, "Having a baby killed everything creative in me--quite different from being pregnant" (Man and Two 103). In her mental state, Dorothy becomes oddly agitated with Jack and Stella's relationship; she goes so far as to suggest a romantic involvement. At the same time, Stella is keenly observing Dorothy's interactions with her newborn son and her husband, who is obviously very much in love with his wife. Ironically, Stella becomes painfully envious of Dorothy's relationships, although Dorothy is simultaneously making

sordid insinuations. Lessing creates this irony for the purpose of characterization, as Stella's character is primarily developed through her relationship with Dorothy. Using *Play With a Tiger* and "A Man and Two Women" as examples, characterization by comparison is clearly a literary tool commonly used by Lessing.

After analyzing the Lessing protagonist as characterized in *The Golden Notebook*, "To Room Nineteen," *Play With a Tiger*, and "A Man and Two Women," many readers would agree that Doris Lessing could serve as a spokeswoman for the Women's Movement. Lessing, however, has spent her entire life emphatically denying such accusations and generalizations. Nine years after she wrote *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing added the now famous "Preface" to the novel, in which she addresses those who attempt to determine a single and rigid meaning and purpose for her writing. Lessing first defines the novel by what it is not, as she claims it is "not a trumpet for Women's Liberation" (*Notebook ix*). Doris Lessing purports to be offended by the pretentiousness of those who make such claims. Lessing even questions the value of the critic, when she proposes:

Why should there be anyone else who comprehends what he [the writer] trying to do? After all, there is only one person spinning that particular cocoon, only one person whose business it is to spin it." (*Notebook xv*)

Thus, Lessing bristles when others suggest definite and invariable meanings for her works.

Viewing formal education as a massive critic, Lessing attacks the educational system, which she proudly escaped at age fourteen, for its role as the oppressor of "imaginative and original judgement" (*Notebook xvi*). She is extremely troubled by those who attempt to teach single and definitive meanings of her works, as she thus accuses teachers and professors of

playing the pretentious role of the critic. Furthermore, Lessing accuses the critics of establishing the academic canon, which she finds worthless and inhibiting (Rowe 114).

In response to her famous “Preface,” many scholars have interpreted Doris Lessing’s denouncement of critics and formal education as a mechanism of self-defense (Rowe 114). In order to establish a position of literary power, Lessing must gain acceptance for her lack of formal education. The canon is comprised of well-educated men, neither of which Lessing can claim. She must, therefore, compensate for her lack of formal education by praising the power of autodidacticism (Rowe 114). In her “Preface,” Lessing claims:

Those of you who are more robust and individual than others, will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself--educating your own judgement. (*Notebook* xvii)

Lessing’s fame and notoriety balance her lack of education, for she is undeniably respected as a literary figure. Lessing’s stance on autodidacticism has been supported and strengthened through the years by the establishment of a literary society in her honor, known as the Doris Lessing Society, as well as a publication, *The Doris Lessing Newsletter*. Most of the scholars who belong to this society claim to have been influenced by her writing on a personal level, and thus appreciate Lessing’s work more thoroughly and wholly than merely its literary value. John Carey, who has been noted for writing the first doctoral dissertation on Lessing in 1965, claims, “*The Golden Notebook* had a profound effect on my life and influenced me in a number of personal ways” (qtd in Kaplan 9). Paul Schlueter, another Lessing scholar, emerged in the sixties as a key figure in the organization of the Doris Lessing Society. Schlueter was assigned *The Golden Notebook* in a graduate course and was

taken by its relevance to his personal life. Schlueter said, “I was amazed at how much it spoke to me and my own situation, nearing the pressure point... in my first marriage” (qtd in Kaplan 11). Despite Schlueter’s male perspective, the institution of marriage is a common thread among Lessing scholars.

Furthermore, Dee Seligman began seminars in the early sixties on the literary works of Doris Lessing at the annual Modern Language Association’s meetings, which eventually led to the *Doris Lessing Newsletter* (Kaplan 9). Seligman notes that her interest in Doris Lessing was sparked during her first pregnancy, which, once again, suggests a powerful female attraction to Lessing’s works. Seligman suggests that her noted archetypal female experience through Lessing’s works and Lessing’s vocabulary of female intimacy, such as **network** and **connection**, are crucial to the critical endeavor of all Lessing scholars (qtd in Kaplan 10).

Dorothy Brewster, one of these Lessing scholars, focuses on the relationship between women, particularly in *The Golden Notebook* as compared to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (Bloom 29). Brewster, as a female writer, points out the likeness of Lessing’s pair of female characters to Woolf’s pair, as both pairs are often together in the absence of men (Bloom 29). About her own pair of independent females, Woolf noted, “how long accustomed women have been to concealment and suppression when they thought themselves observed” (Bloom 29). Woolf believed that women were all too often characterized by their relationships with men (Bloom 29). A generation later, Doris Lessing started her own repertoire of novels which are said to be based on this same feminist stance.

However, despite what the scholars and critics may suggest, it is dangerous to categorize Doris Lessing’s style and beliefs into a single literary stance. Doris Lessing has

spent her entire life vehemently denying these single literary stances, and it is this ambiguous and flippant persona that has intrigued her readers for four decades. In volume 2, number 2 of the 1976 *Doris Lessing Newsletter*, Lois Marchino begins her article, "Life, Lessing, and the Pursuit of Feminist Criticism," with a series of questions:

How can we respond to the challenges Lessing puts before us as critics?

How could we be Lessing readers--especially all of us women who are teaching in universities--without worrying about the question, and not only about our criticism, but about our participation in the institutions, about our lives? What kind of criticism can we write, especially since Lessing covers everything herself?" (qtd in Kaplan 11)

Those scholars who have tried to establish the "definitive word" (Kaplan 13) on Lessing have been scorned by their contemporaries, who have resigned the search to the impossibility of the absolute definition, as well as scorned by Lessing herself.

Marchino's question regarding the teaching of Lessing's works was responded to by another Lessing scholar, Katherine Fishburn, who wrote an essay titled "Teaching Doris Lessing as a Subversive Activity: A Response to the 'Preface' to *The Golden Notebook*" (Kaplan 81). Fishburn views the augmented Preface as a challenge to teach *The Golden Notebook* within the parameters Lessing has set, which is teaching it without imposing or suggesting a single meaning. Because Lessing takes the stance that the educational system is based on indoctrination, where students are subordinate to their superiors and the opinions of the superiors rule, Fishburn has approached the teaching of this novel as a "dialectical teaching story designed to subvert and thus transform our perceptions of the world" (Kaplan

84). Despite Lessing's warning in her "Preface," Fishburn encourages others to accept the challenge and teach *The Golden Notebook* as an opportunity to exercise free thought.

Furthermore, Fishburn states boldly enough that she refutes the notion that Lessing's works are didactic; rather, Fishburn describes Lessing's style as "Socratic" (Kaplan 83). Fishburn claims that despite Lessing's denouncement of formal education, Lessing does assume the role of a teacher to her strong following of highly-educated literary scholars. Fishburn argues that Lessing's method of teaching is that "she engages her readers in a progressive dialogue that leads them through a series of multiple realities to a new view of the world" (qtd in Kaplan 83). Although Lessing is not a teacher in the setting of formal education, she is undeniably a teacher in literary subversion. Finally, Fishburn suggests that by degrading the role of the teacher and critic, Lessing is, thus, degrading her own role as a literary figure (Kaplan 83).

In the opinion of this Lessing critic, the complexity of the Lessing protagonist is not only the result of her writing ability, but also her refusal to allow definitive characteristics for her protagonists. This complexity can be attributed to their constant metamorphosis, which usually involves a shift in character, such as Susan Rawling's shift from stable to insane, Anna Freeman's shift from independent to codependent, and Dorothy Bradford's shift from being free to being confined. The only true consistency among Lessing's protagonists is their change in spirit. In both her personal life and literary works, the only safe characterization of Doris Lessing is dynamic. Doris Lessing is not without purpose; however, her scholars and critics often dwell solely on the nexus between writer and work and neglect the opportunity for introspection. Introspective independence is Lessing's ammunition, as close-minded

stagnation is her enemy. This critic believes that Lessing's works should be read for the insight that is gained from searching within oneself for meaning. Furthermore, this critic feels that Lessing's protagonists are only complex if the reader is resistant to change. To accept the realism of the mental and emotional metamorphosis that is common among all humans is to truly accept the Lessing protagonist.

To become a true scholar on the subject of the Doris Lessing protagonist is to accept the roles of her protagonists, despite their likelihood to be female, without definition or resolution. To achieve a sense of Doris Lessing's purpose is to accept the idea that an institutionalized purpose is preposterous, despite her common themes of madness. To appreciate Doris Lessing from a literary stance is to accept her word that she writes without any feminist persuasion. As Katherine Fishburn said, "Through the metaphor of her fiction, we learn that the meaning of the world eludes us if we try, by constitutionalizing or labeling it, to pin it down" (qtd in Kaplan 90). Doris Lessing, who is still alive today, believes that instead of attempting to explain the world, we should simply experience it, and her characters reinforce this idea.



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